

Road cuts take U.S. nowhere

We've all heard of the infamous bridge to nowhere. Now it seems that, at least for the time being, the construction and improvement some of our roads may be going nowhere, albeit a different type of nowhere.

On Friday, the U.S. Department of Transportation said it's running out of money that helps states construct new roads and highways. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said the funding situation will start occurring this month, and that some construction payments will have to be cut.

In reaction, officials with the Arizona Department of Transportation announced on Friday that in all likelihood, several road projects are going to be delayed until the federal dollars can be delivered. They estimated the total worth of those projects at about \$170 million, which doesn't seem like a lot when ADOT was hoping to award nearly \$4.1 billion in projects for 14 counties in the state.

But these kinds of highway cuts would have an impact in Arizona, which is one of the nation's fastest growing states. And, it would seem, the cuts will slow the state's progress.

What kinds of projects are being put on hold? For example, there's a hold being placed on the widening of Highway 93 east of the Hoover Dam, which is worth about \$107 million. The project would make a better highway to Las Vegas.

And there are other projects, most of which are in the areas outside Maricopa County (that county has a sales tax that helps, but does not cover all, of the costs of road projects).

So, in areas such as Cochise County, federal highway dollars being cut will likely have a more significant impact.

So, what can be done?

Well, first, it seems that the Highway Trust Fund is somewhat dependent on how much we drive. A portion of the taxes on gasoline goes into the fund. And, Peters said, with a drop in motoring since the rise in gas prices, the amount of money being collected for the fund has dropped, too.

Peters also blames Congress for not acting on her warnings that the fund might be put into danger. While the House has passed \$8 billion relief for the fund this year, the Senate hasn't acted on it yet. And even Peters' own boss wasn't reportedly thrilled with the infusion of cash until the current situation arose. But Peters says that money is needed to keep the fund going for now.

So some type of solution can't come until Congress is in session, which starts again next week.

Until then, states will have to start delaying projects or cutting back, just as Arizona has done. One problem from those reductions also doesn't help the economy: That also means there's a potential for more job losses.

This situation should be a warning sign to us all. If Congress can't find a solution to the highway funding issues, then it is left to the states to determine a direction. In Arizona, that's been left up in the air, and the TIME initiative that didn't make the ballot this November could have been a solution for voters to consider. Now the state may have to wait for the Legislature to return in January before being able to start to deal with this issue.

With the state's budget already being tight, there doesn't seem to be much money to fill the federal void.

Arizonans, as well as all Americans, should be concerned about the news that the nation's Highway Trust Fund is "nearly out of gas," as the Washington Post put it Saturday.

Without continued improvement on roads, especially in growing areas such as Arizona, the nation's transportation system will crumble. This should be at the top of Congress' to-do list when it gets back to work next week. And it should be an issue that we should be asking our presidential candidates about, seeing if they have an idea on how to deal with such a problem.

Heading nowhere doesn't help our nation's progress.